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Smooth waters ahead or rising tides of uncertainty? Philippine foreign policy under President Rodrigo Duterte

Abstract

The Philippines is in the midst of a transition. The astonishing rise and decisive victory of newly elected Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte marks a significant turning point in the landscape of Philippine politics. Duterte's inimitable style outraged his critics, embarrassed imperial Manila's entrenched elites, and triggered disquieting ripples across the globe to an audience unaccustomed to the foul-mouthed, tough-talking, long-time mayor of Davao City in southern Philippines. But the Philippine electorate, angry and despondent, economically disenfranchised, and frustrated with perennial problems of corruption, crime and illegal drugs, massively supported his incendiary campaign. The resounding protest vote that catapulted Duterte into victory is a clear call for change from a nation weary of traditional politics and broken promises.

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Bangkerohan Bridge in Davao City where President Duterte previously served as mayor for 22 years.

Photo Credit: Jeffrey Pioquinto/flickr.

Smooth Waters Ahead or Rising Tides of Uncertainty? Philippine Foreign Policy Under President Rodrigo Duterte

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The Philippines is in the midst of a transition. The astonishing rise and decisive victory of newly elected Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte marks a significant turning point in the landscape of Philippine politics. Duterte's inimitable style outraged his critics, embarrassed imperial Manila's entrenched elites, and triggered disquieting ripples across the globe to an audience unaccustomed to the foul-mouthed, tough-talking, long-time mayor of Davao City in southern Philippines. But the Philippine electorate, angry and despondent, economically disenfranchised, and frustrated with perennial problems of corruption, crime and illegal drugs, massively supported his incendiary campaign. The resounding protest vote that catapulted Duterte into victory is a clear call for change from a nation weary of traditional politics and broken promises.

Duterte's Brand of Diplomacy

However, in the sombre stage of global diplomacy where tradition, protocol and etiquette are primordial values, the raw honesty, populist theatrics, impulsiveness and frivolity of President Duterte may not be received with delightful enthusiasm. His rhetorical blusters, which so far included graphic anecdotal allusions to his philandering and genitalia, necrophiliac jokes, endorsement of extrajudicial killings, and relentless tirades against the Catholic clergy, may have endeared him to the Filipino masses but these playful witticisms have also proven unpopular to outside spectators.

Even before he was officially sworn into office, the series of diplomatic faux pas that peppered the Duterte campaign trail makes it obvious that he is not a foreign policy maverick. His "apparent endorsement" of extrajudicial killings was strongly condemned by United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki Moon who was "extremely disturbed" by his antagonizing remarks against journalists in the Philippines.¹ Duterte's earlier scathing statements that corrupt journalists deserve to be killed also earned heavy criticisms from UN special rapporteurs on human rights.² Malacañang dismissed the incident as a misinterpretation of the president's statements, which were allegedly taken out of context and based on the wrong premise. The heated war of words was ignited by Duterte's previous

unprovoked attacks against the institutional ineffectiveness of the UN for its failure to end violence in the Middle East and Africa, and for its hypocrisy on issues concerning climate change that fail to impose sanctions on industrialized countries whose carbon footprint cause greater damage to the environment.³

A Pattern of Breaking Tradition

The new Philippine president, the country's first chief executive from Mindanao and the first city mayor to jump straight to the highest elected post in the land, finds no qualms in breaking tradition. His recent inauguration convincingly proves this. On June 30, 2016, in austere rites devoid of the usual pomp and pageantry and *sans* elected Vice President Leni Robredo who was sworn in in a separate ceremony, the 16th president of the Republic of the Philippines took his oath at Malacañang Palace before law school fraternity brother Associate Justice of the Supreme Court Bienvenido Reyes and a small cadre of diplomats and select guests.

He is beholden to no one and does not treat any institution, whether local or foreign, too sacrosanct to be disparaged if he deems such is merited. In his own words in his inaugural speech, "I have no friends to serve, I have no enemies to harm."⁴ He pokes fun at Manila's oligarchs, constantly derides the Catholic church, threatened to dissolve Congress and defy the judiciary, if they dare stand in his way. He has recently entreated the military's top generals whom he believes to be protectors of the country's drug lords to step down lest he humiliate them and forcibly oust them from their posts. He unapologetically offers an iron fist whilst bragging about it. His emblematic cavalier attitude and his bombastic style and rough language may not have universal appeal, but he may just be the knight in shining armor that the Philippines needs. Or so his multitude of supporters and those prudently and patiently willing to give him the chance to prove himself earnestly believe and are waiting on him to deliver his mantra that true change and transformation is finally coming to this country.

General Currents of Foreign Policy Under the Duterte Presidency

The Philippine constitutional structure is essentially presidential in orientation, which vests overwhelming power and authority upon the chief executive. The president is the chief architect of Philippine foreign policy, and as such customarily determines the cadence and course of the country's external relations. This places a heavy burden upon the shoulders of President Duterte who needs to have a solid grasp of geopolitics, foreign relations and international law. The capricious plethora of foreign policy issues that await the president's decisive action is exceptionally complex and daunting. This job is certainly not for the faint-hearted, of which Duterte, sometimes to a fault, is clearly not. Beware the fatal combination of audacity and hubris.

It does not take great imagination to envisage that Philippine foreign policy under President Duterte will be profoundly different from the previous Aquino administration. The priorities, philosophy, and dynamics that inform the policies of Duterte will be fashioned and influenced by his background as a local politician from southern Philippines, predicated on his anti-establishment position as a virtual outsider in national politics and practically a neophyte to the intricacies of foreign policy and international relations. However, he has the temperament, experience and pragmatism essential to leadership in foreign policy matters.

Duterte's early pronouncements give a strong impression that the immediate focus of his administration will be largely inward-looking: addressing insurgency in southern Philippines, restoring peace and order, curbing crime rates, eradicating illegal trade in drugs. The laundry list is long and some of them not very popular: shift to federalism, constitutional change, opening festering national debate on whether to allow a hero's burial to former President Ferdinand Marcos. Foreign policy was never a central issue in the presidential elections, neither were economic platforms or national security. And even in his inauguration speech, President Duterte cautiously chose to encapsulate them in general terms brushing aside specifics for the time being, but assuring everyone that his economic, financial and political policies shall be supplied in due time.⁵

In crafting Duterte's foreign policy blueprint, he needs to consider the three interconnected pillars upon which Philippine foreign policy rests: national security, economic security and the protection of the rights and interests of Filipinos overseas. His more amicable, less confrontational position in respect to the South China Sea, contrasted with his brazen contempt of the United States, represents a radical shift in longstanding foreign policy alignments. This departure requires a delicate balancing act and will be met with strong opposition and may signal instability to the rest of the region especially within ASEAN.

Duterte has laid down his administration's wide-ranging 8-point economic agenda, which ensures continuity of the Aquino administration's macroeconomic policies, tax reform, increased infrastructure spending to support the country's agricultural sector, attract foreign investments by reducing crime and corruption.⁶ No objections to these sweepingly broad economic policy directives, but the devil will always be in the detail. There are other pressing economics and trade issues that need to be addressed in the immediate future including the country's integration with Southeast Asia under the ASEAN Economic Community framework, and other broad trade and economic initiatives such as the US-led Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific (FTAAP) within APEC, or Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership as an alternative to the TPP, or even China's Maritime Silk Road "One Belt, One Road" initiative. The challenge is for Duterte to strike the right balance among these multiple and competing initiatives alongside the pressures of foreign-driven interests in a way that would not cost him to compromise what he believes are Philippine national interests.

The South China Sea Dispute

Manila's longstanding territorial and maritime disputes with China over the West Philippine Sea will definitely be among the most immediate and intricate foreign policy challenges facing Philippine President Duterte. His position on this issue solidly rests on his views about China. At the moment, the imminent test of how Duterte will successfully navigate the turbulent waters of the South China Sea is how he could restore the currently precarious bilateral relationship with China whilst maintaining robust security and defense relations with the United States. This requires a delicate balancing act and no easy feat to accomplish.

In sharp contrast to Duterte's popular image of being fearless, volatile and unpredictable, his conciliatory and amicable position towards China seems a conundrum. On the exterior, it is worrisome that whilst Duterte has indulged the public by spur of the moment histrionics, including a remark to ride a jet ski to plan a Philippine flag on Chinese-occupied artificial islands, he

has yet to reveal any concrete foreign policy directive towards China and the country's disputes over the South China Sea.

The outgoing Aquino administration has consistently maintained a hard-line policy towards Beijing over the South China Sea dispute and, in stark contrast, warm relations and deepening security ties with Washington and Tokyo. In the Southeast Asia, if not the whole of Asia, Manila has emerged as the most outspoken opponent of Chinese provocative actions in the highly contested South China Sea, including a tense standoff over Scarborough Shoal in 2012 and more recent occupation and development of features in the South China Sea. The former incident brought bilateral relationship between the two countries at its lowest since the 1995 Mischief Reef incident, prompting Manila to file an arbitral case in 2013 against Beijing over its controversial nine-dashed line. The highly anticipated ruling of arbitral tribunal is now available and, as most analysts predict, unfavorable to China.

Duterte's election pronouncements on China and his views on the South China Sea disputes appear to be diametrically at odds with the current design and trajectory of Philippine foreign policy on these important issues. Duterte favors directly negotiating with China and willing to shelve contentious issues of sovereignty in exchange for Chinese economic concessions. He espouses joint venture on oil and gas exploration with China whilst eschewing the issue of ownership if necessary. Duterte is opposed to the idea of going to war with China and he does not advocate the use of legal avenues to enforce the Philippine claim. Instead, he prefers a multilateral approach that will bring rival claimants and even extraregional powers to the negotiating table. These views, albeit not necessarily novel, do not seem subversively treasonous and definitely signal a radical shift in Philippine-China relations under the Duterte presidency.

A Pivot in Philippine-China Relations

The direction of Philippine-China relations under the Duterte presidency is still amorphous at this stage. The paucity of any solid, long-term and categorical statement from the president on the South China Sea—nay on foreign policy in general—under his administration makes gazing at the crystal ball particularly difficult. At best, Duterte's rhetoric suggests a more amicable and conciliatory diplomatic stance between Manila and Beijing. In some ways, this could be a good thing. The two countries could focus their energies and resources on infrastructure and economic activities that are mutually beneficial. On the other hand, the softening of Manila's stand against an increasingly aggressive and expansionist China could expose cracks in the unstable regional security architecture and further weaken concerted efforts of extraregional powers such as the United States and Japan to counterbalance China's provocative military posturing, as well as subvert ASEAN initiatives to rally behind a unified position against an assertive China. The rapid shift in defense posture could further increase the risk of miscalculations and provocations on the ground, and undermine longstanding efforts that reinforce a rules-based approach in resolving the South China Sea disputes.

The Arbitral Tribunal Decision

The first litmus test of where the populist strongman stands on the issue of the South China Sea came on July 12, 2016 when The Hague-based Arbitral Tribunal issued its final award on the arbitration case filed against China with the Permanent Court of Arbitration in 2013. And at a critical time in the nation's history when the rest of the world is waiting for how the Philippines will proceed after the overwhelming arbitral tribunal victory, there was disquieting silence from the chief executive. The newly

appointed Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Perfecto Yasay, issued a terse statement calling for "restraint and sobriety" following the Philippines' landmark win. There is a sense of muted jubilation in Manila without any triumphalist fanfare, in keeping with the President's clear "no taunt, no flaunt" instructions. Duterte's silence could be disconcerting and rather uncharacteristic, but possibly the prudent and judicious approach at this difficult time. There are challenging and real work ahead on more contentious issues of sovereignty, maritime delimitation, reparations and fisheries enforcement and multilateral negotiations. For the time being, Duterte's deliberate decision to be cautiously tight-lipped, averting the possibility of any unintended callous or inflammatory statements, should be respected.

The Chinese government has repeatedly confirmed that it would not honor the award of the tribunal nor consider itself bound by its verdict. In 2017, when the Philippines assumes chairmanship of ASEAN is another occasion in the distant horizon when his leadership on the simmering cauldron of conflict that is the South China Sea will be put under scrutiny. It is still too early in the day to see how a Duterte presidency will respond to China and where he truly draws the line with Manila's big neighbor. The unpredictable and volatile nature of the incoming president makes it even harder to calculate his position.

The competing claims on the South China Sea have made its waters rather turbulent in recent times. But hope always remains buoyant. And the man of the hour is Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte on whose shoulders rests the hope that he can capably navigate the turbulent waters of the South China Sea and sail his country towards smooth and calm waters.

The leadership change in Manila will certainly have significant impact on the country's foreign policy. It will be radically different and largely driven by the personality of the new Philippine president. On balance, it will be safe to say that the road ahead will by no means be an easy one. But the president has assured his countrymen in his inaugural speech that he is ready to start his work for the nation. He has also reassured the international community that he will adhere to the rule of law and respect the country's international obligations. Honest and reassuring words from the man who has captured the imagination of the Filipino masses longing for the change he has so cleverly hawked to them. Duterte has to succeed, as one must hope he will, if but to teach a generation that their beloved country could be great again. Duterte needs to fully utilize his political capital along with the goodwill and massive support of the masses, and seize the opportunities that come from his unique leadership and personality style. Overall, the political and economic prospects for the Philippines under the presidency of Duterte look relatively promising, and he will likely exceed expectations.

Endnotes

1. <http://cnnphilippines.com/news/2016/06/10/Duterte-media-killings-extra-judicial-killings-UN.html>
2. <http://cnnphilippines.com/news/2016/06/07/un-special-rapporteurs-duterte-stand-assassination-of-journalists.html>
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6. <http://cnnphilippines.com/news/2016/05/12/rodrigo-duterte-eight-point-economic-agenda.html>